

The Battle of Homildon Hill: 14 September 1402

On this day, 14 September, in the year 1402, the battle of Homildon Hill was fought between the Scots and the English.

History is littered with the ongoing feuding in the Borders, with Scots and English engaging in many bloody battles over the centuries.

Henry IV had been King of England since 1367. In early 1402, the King's forces were deployed fighting a revolt in Wales. The Scots led by Robert, Duke of Albany and Archibald, Earl of Douglas decided to take the opportunity to invade the north while the English army was busy elsewhere.

Throughout the summer of 1402 the Scots made a number of raids, of which the largest took place in August. The Earl of Douglas and 10,000 men rampaged through Northumberland, as far south as Newcastle, plundering and burning villages as they went.



Harehope Hill

However, they were not to escape “scot-free”! The army was heading back to the border, via the Tweed crossing at

Coldstream, but they were laden down with their spoils. To their dismay they were intercepted by the Earl of Northumberland and his infamous son Sir Henry "Hotspur" Percy, whose forces were amassed on the plain near Milfield.

Upon realising they were cut off and would have to fight the English, the Scots headed for high ground, climbing the slopes of Homildon (now Humbleton) Hill, which rises steeply, looming up behind Homildon Cottage.

The English, seeing the Scots' position, sent a force of archers ahead who climbed Harehope Hill, a hill neighbouring Homildon Hill with just a deep gulley between.

From this position, the English – and Welsh – archers loosed a volley of arrows which rained down on the Scots forces, whose armour was no match for the arrows "which fell like a storm of rain". Lacking the archery tradition so valued in England, the Scots' bowmen were generally not as proficient and their bows less powerful. In a long range archery duel such as this, there was no competition.



The ill-fated Scottish horse charge (from Cassell's Illustrated History of England (1895))

The *Scotichronicon*, written in the 1440s by Walter Bower, recounted the battle from the Scottish point of view. It describes “The English bowmen, advancing towards the Scots, smothered them with arrows and made them bristly like a hedgehog, transfixing the hands and arms of the Scots to their own lances. By means of this very harsh rain of arrows they made some duck, they wounded others, and killed many.”

The Scots tried sending small bands of horsemen, including the Earl of Douglas, to attempt an attack on the archers from close range. This was unsuccessful – the riders were picked off by the archers just as easily and soon the Scots had to admit defeat. Routed, the battle was over in an hour. Some tried to escape and, by all accounts, a large number of men drowned while trying to flee across the river Tweed.

The battle had a significant impact on future events. Many valuable Scottish prisoners were taken by the Percys during the battle, but King Henry demanded these prisoners were handed over to him. This sowed seeds of future trouble between “Hotspur” Percy and King Henry. Indeed, the battle was immortalised in the words of William Shakespeare in *Henry IV*, part 1.

*Here is a dear, a true industrious friend,
Sir Walter Blunt, new lighted from his horse.
Stain'd with the variation of each soil
Betwixt that Holmedon and this seat of ours;
And he hath brought us smooth and welcome news.
The Earl of Douglas is discomfited:
Ten thousand bold Scots, two and twenty knights,
Balk'd in their own blood did Sir Walter see
On Holmedon's plains. Of prisoners, Hotspur took
Mordake the Earl of Fife, and eldest son
To beaten Douglas; and the Earl of Athol,
Of Murray, Angus, and Menteith:
And is not this an honourable spoil?
A gallant prize? ha, cousin, is it not?*

– *Shakespeare, Henry IV, part 1, act 1, scene 1.*